

Introducing 'seeds of change' into the food system? Localisation strategies in the Swiss dairy industry

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Abstract

The Swiss dairy-farming sector faces challenging times after the removal of milk quotas. In this context, several cooperative/federative structures have developed new strategies to improve the situation of dairy farmers. Local products play an important role in these strategies. Based on ethnographic work, this paper looks at the social construction and negotiation of 'the local' within three specific case studies. First, we show what diverging geographical and moral definitions of 'the local' emerge from the development of these localised food networks. Then we look at how the various moralities of 'the local' in turn contribute to the transformation of the actor's position within the broader food system. Finally, we argue that apparently narrow economic strategies of food might open new paths for more transformative developments based on alternative values such as regional development, solidarity and identity.

Keywords: local food, dairy, Switzerland, autonomy, alternative food networks, provenance

1. Introduction

In Switzerland, a growing interest in localised food can currently be observed. A trend among consumers to buy local products reflects an increasing supply and declaration of local products in shops and restaurants, in the creation of numerous commercial labels for locally produced food and in the development of new offerings and forms of direct sales. At the same time, the development of local food networks (LFNs) in Western industrialised countries has inspired a large amount of studies and literature. The diversity of lived experiences reported

has resulted in a blurred definition of what LFNs actually are (Eriksen 2013). After an initial enthusiastic general agreement on the benefit of food re-localisation, many scholars started to be more critical. For instance, they identified conservative and defensive forms of local-food practices, contrasting them with the assumed alternative and progressive qualities of localism (Hinrichs 2003, Winter 2003). Building on the critical debates emerging from this scholarship, this paper aims to grasp ‘the local’ and understand what it means more precisely in three specific food localisation initiatives within the Swiss dairy industry. Moreover, it aims to explore the transformative capacity of the localisation process when it occurs within the conventional food system, i.e. the ‘seeds of change’ that localisation strategies might, willingly or not, introduce when developing new food networks within the food system¹.

The background of this paper is on-going research into alternatives in the Swiss dairy industry, focusing on the reconfiguring of networks and producers’ empowerment. New projects have been developed by various actors with the aim of strengthening the position of farmers. Their primary goal is generally to improve farmers’ income by gaining added value, notably by targeting consumers who are ready to pay higher prices for localised products. This paper explores three examples of such initiatives.

After a short and condensed review of the debates in the literature, we present our methods and theoretical inspirations. We then analyse how ‘the local’ is constructed and negotiated within the three food networks. This allows us to identify plural definitions of localness, initially in its spatial dimension, but also in the values it refers to. Finally, we show how the integration of local food-based arguments into marketing strategies interacts with broader concerns about the regional economy, solidarity among farmers and regional and professional identities. Although our case studies do not show that food localisation results in impressive progress towards a more sustainable food system, we argue that it has opened the way to alternative values.

2. The contested meanings of the local

Locality or localisation has from the beginning been a central element in the study of alternatives in food networks (Sonnino 2013). Central to the definition of the ‘alternativeness’ of the food networks studied by scholars as rejections of a capitalised, industrialised and globalised hegemonic system are a small scale, a proximity to consumers and a relation to place (Goodman *et al.* 2011). However, what is and what is not ‘local’ has been much discussed (Eriksen 2013). According to Hand and Martinez (2010), an agreement can be found on a very general definition: “Local food clearly refers to a geographic production area that is circumscribed by boundaries and in close proximity to the consumer”. The geographical reconnection of food and places is central. Local food, as “food from somewhere”, can then be described as a response to anonymous and disconnected food within a “food from nowhere regime” (Campbell 2009, McMichael 2002). Here, geographical distance is related to social and ecological embeddedness, which potentially opens new paths

towards more sustainable food systems (Campbell 2009). This connection between food and place makes possible a wide and varied range of food networks. In an attempt to order the diverse nature of LFNs, many studies have offered typologies (Brunori 2007, Eriksen 2013, Tregear 2007).

Many authors, however, have developed incisive criticism of misuses, shortcuts and simplifications that undermine the debates on LFNs. Notably, they warn against the tendency to conflate characteristics of food networks: 'local' does not automatically mean 'alternative' or 'sustainable' (Ilbery & Maye 2005). This "unreflexive localism" (DuPuis & Goodman 2005) leads to what Born and Purcell (2006: 195) call "the local trap", which "refers to the tendency of food activists and researchers to assume something inherent about the local scale" (195). Much work on localised food practices has identified a propensity to 'defensive localism', which reinforces social and identity boundaries while paying little attention to ecological or social justice aspects (Allen 1999, Hinrichs 2003, Holloway & Kneasfey 2000, Winter 2003). Similarly, the relations between food localisation and rural development are often taken for granted, but remain generally unchecked and unclear (Deverre & Lamine 2010, Sonnino & Marsden 2006, Tregear 2011). This scholarship parallels a broader criticism against too optimistic a belief in the potential of alternative food networks to introduce change in the overall system. A good example is the work of Guthman (2004) on the "conventionalisation" of organic farming in California. The author warns against the propensity of 'alternative' food productions to be re-appropriated by big agri-business, questioning the transformative capacity of organic agriculture.

While the discussion about 'the local trap' is important and necessary, there are other issues related to 'the local' and its definition. Most emerge from the fact that 'the local' is socially and contextually produced (Born & Purcell 2006: 197). Social distance might then play a greater role than physical distance in the definition of 'the local' in a given situation (Hand & Martinez 2010: 180). The very meaning of 'local' is constructed and negotiated by actors within specific networks. At stake here is not only the geographical definition of the local, but also the general objectives of food networks. Following Tovey (2009), the struggle between diverging conceptions of 'local food' is not only over economic strategies, but also "over the social forms and relations of production seen as appropriate for 'rural development'" (22). The blurred definitions of 'the local' are also open to stronger criticism regarding the long-existing debates about the relation between local and global, applied to the 'globalised countryside' (Woods 2007), and to the opposition between conventional/alternative food networks. While most of the literature focuses on marginal spaces and contexts, presenting localisation processes as an alternative to conventional food networks and intensive agriculture, this paper contributes to the emerging scholarship tracing the local within the conventional food system (O'Neill 2014, Selfa & Qazi 2005).

There is general agreement in the literature that binary conceptualisations are problematic. Simplistic dichotomies – such as local/ global, alternative/conventional – should be overcome in order to better understand the complexity of social processes occurring today in food systems (Feagan 2007, Milestad *et al.* 2010, Rosin & Campbell 2009). In a sense, this rejection of binary framing of the food system echoes the theory of ‘glocalisation’, defined by Robertson (1995: 31) as “an increasing globe-wide discourse of locality, community, home and the like”. Thus, there are no oppositions between the global and the local. Rather, the process of globalisation goes hand in hand with renewed expressions of the local. Localisation is not a ‘reaction’ to globalising forces: globalisation and localisation are parts of the same process. Accordingly, the superposition of global and local scales leads to “hybridisation” (Woods 2007:502) and ‘local’ and ‘conventional’ food networks therefore become hybrid “glocal spaces”, rather than two oppositional realities (Wilson & Whitehead 2012: 205). Consequently, the question is not whether a food network can be called local or not, but “how the ‘local’ is constructed and used as a means of reconnecting with a locality” (Wilson & Whitehead 2012: 206). Posing this question and following Sonnino’s suggestion to “focus on the tangible outcomes of different discursive practices” (Sonnino 2013: 4) in order to progress the debate on the benefits or failure of re-localisation strategies, we aim here to explore how such strategies might open the way to deeper transformations of the broader system.

3. Theoretical and methodological approach

3.1 ANT and the construction of ‘the local’

In their critique of the ‘local food’ literature, Born and Purcell (2006) argue that network analysis offers a means of avoiding ‘the local trap’. Indeed, network approaches have largely been applied in agri-food studies looking at, for example, economic relations between human actors along the food chain (Murdoch 2000) or new forms of embeddedness in alternative food networks (Bowen 2011, Sage 2003, Sonnino 2007, Winter 2003). Several authors have explored the potential of a specific network approach: actor-network theory (Busch & Juska 1997, Lockie & Kitto 2000, Murdoch *et al.* 2000). This paper follows a similar path. In particular, we draw on three aspects of this theoretical framework: the scale as a construct, the inclusion of non-human actors and the process of translation. We suggest that actor-network theory (ANT) helps to avoid idealised conceptions of ‘the local’, while still taking ‘the local’ seriously. This is achieved by describing how ‘the ‘local’ is actually constructed and rooted in social relationships.

Firstly, ANT offers interesting options to avoid a dualistic opposition of local and global. Latour (2005: 180) criticises such scalar oppositions, for example that between micro and macro. There is no ontological difference between the local and the global. Scale is not a given variable, but “what actors achieve by scaling, spacing, and contextualizing each other” (Latour 2005: 183-184). Consequently, in doing research, we have to build conceptual approaches to

the social as “flat” by localising the global and redistributing the local (Latour 2005: 171). There is no local *per se*, only networks of connections between actors, which can be followed through the social space and across *a priori* boundaries.

Secondly, the critique of the *a priori* distinction between nature and culture (or society) has certainly been one of the most obvious contributions of ANT to agri-food studies (Busch & Juska 1997, Goodman 1999, Lockie & Kitto 2000, Morgan *et al.* 2006). ANT has helped acknowledge that non-human beings (e.g. animals, diseases, laws, soil) have an active role in the construction of agri-food networks and not only as passive recipients of human action. This has opened very innovative ways of describing, understanding and explaining food production, circulation and consumption. For instance, Law and Mol (Law 2006, Law & Mol 2008) have illustrated the potential of such a ‘symmetrical’ approach in their studies of the UK foot-and-mouth disease crisis. Accordingly, we describe our three case studies as networks of actors or ‘actants’ (Latour 1996: 369). This refers to the literature on food networks and, more precisely, underlines the fact that we are looking at relationships among both human actors and non-human actors such as concepts (local), food stuffs (cheese, milk), etc. In our understanding, the localisation processes are produced and enacted through the development and renewal of a network of relations issuing from the production, processing and circulation of a specific food product. The foodstuff is then at the centre of the network and its identity results from the relations constituting the network, in an evolving and dynamic process.

Finally, ANT offers a powerful framework to understand how meanings are constructed and identities created within a network of connections. Connections among actors in the actor networks create and recreate meanings and identities (Callon 1999). Callon (1986) named this process “translation”. Although we do not apply a classical and full translation method, translation theory does inspire the way we look at our three case studies: through the development of new connections and the enrolment of new actors, the network is transformed and the position, role and identity of all the actors are re-negotiated and re-formulated. In other words, we explore ‘the local’ and the changes occurring in three food networks after the integration (or ‘enrolment’) of a strategy of ‘localisation’.

3.2 Two dimensions of ‘the local’: geography and morality

The definition of the localness of the food network in which actors are involved is the result of a negotiation process. Definitions of ‘the local’ vary not only from one network to another, but also among the actors within the food network itself. In order to understand this construction process of ‘the local’, we draw on similarities in the work of Eriksen (2013) and Brunori (2007). These two authors identify three dimensions of ‘the local’: geographical, relational and symbolic. From the interviews, we identify some elements frequently referred to by actors which clearly relate to the geographical and symbolic dimensions. We term them geography and morality. The distinction between these two dimensions of ‘the local’ offers some parallels

with Vittersø and Amilien's (Vittersø & Amilien 2005) opposition between physical space and place that underlines historical, cultural and social features. In our understanding, the relational dimension is located at another level of analysis and encompasses the two other dimensions of geography and morality. Geographical and moral meanings result from relations within the food network. Consequently, the relational dimension is not included here, but acts as a background for the whole paper.

3.2.1 GEOGRAPHY

By definition, the processes of localisation in agri-food networks refer to the geographical areas where the product is produced, processed, sold and consumed. The geography dimension refers to space and its categorisations and measurement, to the creation and/or reproduction of boundaries materialised in the physical and social environment. In the literature, 'local food' refers to a range of distinct scales: depending on the context, localness is related to a specific local network, a county, a state or even a country as big as Canada (Kneafsey 2010: 179). As highlighted by Tregear (2007, 2011), local food scholars have often focused on the geographical localisation at the production level. Following her insights, it is however crucial to look at both ends of the local, i.e. production and market, and at their relations, in order to understand the localisation strategies that we analyse. The geographical definition of 'the local' often reproduces pre-existing institutional, organisational, administrative or political boundaries (Hinrichs 2003). This is true in our case studies, too, where we find three types of pre-existing boundaries that are used to delimit the extent of the local: *administrative and political boundaries*, the *cooperative's area of activity*, and the *retailers' structure*. These pre-existing boundaries influence the definition of the local through the interaction between actors already 'caught' and constrained by them.

3.2.2 MORALITY

Localness is, however, far more than a question of geographical scales and boundaries. 'The local' refers first and foremost to the moral and political dimension of food (DuPuis & Goodman 2005, McEntee 2010, Megicks *et al.* 2012, Pratt 2007). The morality dimension of 'the local' refers to the values, potential benefits and qualities attributed to localisation strategies by the actors. These relate to history, politics and economy. From the interviews, we identify four moral sub-dimensions, four values used to qualify 'the local': *provenance*, *origin*, *proximity-solidarity* and *ecology*.

'Local' food is by definition connected with a specific place. 'Provenance' and 'origin' both express this connection. Bérard and Marchenay (2008) suggest that the two differ in the collective dimension that "makes a product part of a local culture", provenance meaning "to issue from a place" and origin "to be from a place". Consequently, the moral dimension of *provenance* relates to issues of traceability and trust, i.e. the assumption that knowing where the food comes from provides a better understanding of how it has been produced. In its

simplest expression, provenance only locates the process of food production in space. In contrast, the dimension of *origin* connects the history, the place and the specificities of the product. In this sense, it is related to the French word *terroir* (Barham 2003, Bérard 2011). Each food product has an origin, but only in specific contexts does origin become a value, highlighting the deep rootedness of a product in time and place (Bérard & Marchenay 1995), often formulated within the semantic of 'tradition'. The dimension of *proximity-solidarity* refers to the valuation of social ties and embeddedness and points to the solidarities emerging within the food network. LFNs are known for their capacity to create renewed connections between food producers and consumers. This proximity is often understood as one of the benefits resulting from such food networks (see e.g. Kirwan 2006, Milestad *et al.* 2010, Sage 2003, Tregear 2011). Finally, *ecology* as a moral sub-dimension expresses the potential benefit of local food for the environment, often related – but not limited – to food miles issues.

In this paper, we explore how the actors negotiate the definition of 'the local' in the network in terms of these geographical and moral dimensions, in order to adapt to different goals and objectives. As developed below, different enactments of 'the local' in these three specific networks lead to contrasting effects and affect the nature of the LFN. In the sixth section, we identify three main objectives in the localisation strategies developed in our case studies: to foster the local economy, to enhance producers' collective autonomy, and to revitalise producers' collective identity.

3.3 Methods: ethnography of three Swiss food networks

We used an ethnographical approach, combining semi-directed interviews, observations in the field and document analyses, in order to describe and understand the networks in their evolution and development.

At this stage of the research, 45 interviews have been conducted with actors from the three food networks. We have tried to cover all the main steps in the production, processing and marketing of dairy products, adapting our focus to the specifics of the case studies. For each case study, we interviewed dairy farmers, boards and officers of farmers' organisations, boards of farmers' unions, civil servants, and representatives of supermarket chains and dairy companies². As our research straddles the Swiss linguistic, the interviews were conducted in German or French, according to the interviewee's mother tongue. A similar interview guide was used for all interviews, based mainly on the historical development of the food network and the interviewee's definition(s) of 'the local'.

Observations were mainly conducted during official meetings (annual general meetings and regional meetings **of farmers' organisations**) and public events related to the networks (e.g. inaugurations). Additional information was collected for the case studies from various written sources: websites, newsletters, reports, product advertisements, and newspaper articles. All the collected data were coded using a platform (Nvivo software) for analysing qualitative data.

The coding looks specifically at the various definitions of 'the local' and the values referred to, at the evolution of the relationships between actors, and at the historical development of the networks.

4. Case studies

Our research explores three case studies in the Swiss dairy industry. Milk production is an important sector of Swiss agriculture with about 24,400 dairy farms from a total of 56,575 farms (FOAG 2014). However, the dairy industry has been facing difficult times in the last decade, mainly because of a progressive programme of market deregulation set up by the federal state. All three of our case studies are related to this liberalisation trend. The projects were initiated by regional or local co-operative structures around 2009, as the federal milk quotas were removed (Mann & Gairing 2010), in a context where decreasing prices, overproduction and discord among actors have become recurrent problems (Forney 2012). Despite the creation of an 'inter-professional board' (*Interprofession du lait-IPL*) to coordinate the Swiss milk market, the producers are suffering from the weakness of their position within the conventional and industrial system. In Switzerland, the dairy industry is usually divided into two sectors: the industry milk chain, through which farmers supply a few big processing companies, and the cheese milk chain, characterised by the existence of several protected designation of origin (PDO) labels.

In the industrial milk chain, the milk is processed into fresh milk, yoghurt, butter and other dairy products for direct consumption, but also into milk powder and other components for the agri-food industry. In this system, there are two main possibilities for farmers: deal directly with a dairy company or join a producer organisation (PO), whose main task is to purchase milk from farmers and sell it to the industry. POs are cooperatives of dairy farmers; all members of PO management boards are elected representatives of the farmers; management positions in regional POs are generally occupied by external (i.e. non-farming) professionals. There is little unity among POs, so their strategies and political and market positioning vary from one to the other. As a consequence, deregulation led to an increase in national competition between milk producers. In contrast, the cheese milk chain supplies cheese factories with high quality (produced without silage use) raw milk. While many small-scale production facilities exist, a few large PDOs, organised around inter-professional boards, lead the sector.

In Switzerland, localisation strategies initially developed in the cheese milk chain in the late 1990s with the introduction of the first PDO and protected geographical indication (PGI) regulations in 1997 (Barjolle & Boisseaux 2004). In anticipation of the coming agricultural liberalisation, the objective was to create new tools to help the agriculture industry to face new economic challenges (Boisseaux & Leresche 2002). Since then, the success of localised food products has exploded and many different kinds of labels have been developed (e.g. regional *terroir* products, supermarket 'from the region' labels, etc.). Localisation strategies are

therefore quite familiar in the Swiss agri-food context. Our case studies display new initiatives that aim to improve the situation and position of the dairy farmers within the industrial milk chain by applying localisation strategies. In doing so, the actors adapted and transformed the networks in which they are located.

4.1 Glarner Schabziger

The first case study is part of the 'Project for Regional Development' financed by the federal government through the Federal Office for Agriculture (FOAG)². The project comprises five sub-projects, centred on cheese production and agri-tourism. The objective is to increase added-value creation in the region, the small mountainous canton of Glarus in the German-speaking east of Switzerland. We focus here on one sub-project, whose aim is to safeguard production of an ancient cheese speciality called *Glarner Schabziger*. Its ingredients are curd (Swiss German: *Ziger*) made from skimmed cow's milk, salt and particular herbs (blue fenugreek), which are pulverised, mixed together, compressed and then matured for some months. A local family company (*Geska AG*) manufactures this cheese speciality and markets it in Switzerland and abroad. Already before the initiative, the local milk PO produced the curd and sold it to *Geska AG*. But the production facility was too small and dilapidated, resulting in unstable product quality. In response to supply and quality problems (EU quality regulations) and after long negotiations, the local PO and the factory created a new company (*Glarner Milch AG*) in which the PO holds 51% of the capital. New production facilities were integrated into the *Geska AG* building and in spring 2013 production started. This new joint venture of dairy farmers and cheese manufacturer will ensure milk sales, guarantee a good milk price for dairy farmers and secure the production of *Glarner Schabziger*.

4.2 Le Grand Pré

The second case study is located in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. There, we look at a regional PO, *Prolait*, and its developing strategies related to 'local food'. *Prolait* recently took over local production of cheese specialities which had been created in relation to the activity of the now-closed cantonal school of cheese-making.

The project involved the creation of a new brand for regional dairy products, *Le Grand Pré*, the construction of a new cheese factory in the town of Moudon and the creation of a limited company, *Le Grand Pré SA*, to run it. *Prolait* fully owns *Le Grand Pré SA*. The two organisations share the same director and two members of *Prolait's* management board are also on the management board of *Le Grand Pré SA*. Theoretically, when the company becomes profitable, the profits will be transferred to the members of the PO by means of a higher milk price. Building the cheese factory required significant investment and was financed jointly by public money, a mortgage and the *Prolait* investment fund (based on members' contributions).

4.3 MIBA products

The third case study is located in north-west Switzerland, straddling the linguistic border. The regional PO, MIBA (Dairy Federation of North-West Switzerland), has re-launched its old brand for dairy products. MIBA products were once well known in the region. However, production stopped and the brand disappeared from the market for years after the PO lost all its processing facilities in the restructuring of the national dairy industry at the end of the 20th century. MIBA, however, has been active in the distribution of dairy products (from other brands) for many years. Recently the PO has integrated its own products into this existing distribution channel. Customers are mainly small shops and institutions (hospital, retirement homes, restaurants, hotels). MIBA also delivers milk to some private consumers as well.

So far, the development of this new production has been achieved without significant investment as MIBA works with existing processing structures. Most of the new MIBA products are processed in a small-scale factory located in the region belonging to the biggest Swiss dairy group, Emmi. However, MIBA owns 20% of the factory's capital. Moreover, MIBA has benefited from existing cooperation with retailers in relation to its distribution activities. Efforts have been concentrated on the development of the new products (recipes) and the marketing strategy. MIBA has employed a marketing manager to improve its skills.

5. The construction of 'the local': negotiations on boundaries and moralities

In the following, we illustrate how the two dimensions of 'the local', geography and morality, and their sub-dimensions (see section 3), are referred to and mobilised in the construction of 'the local' in our case studies. A summary of the main elements is presented in table 1 (see section 6).

5.1 The geography of 'the local'

The geographical delimitation of 'the local' in our three cases is the product of negotiations among actors who are already located within existing geographical boundaries. In this section, we explore how these boundaries impacted the LFNs at the level of production and marketing.

5.1.1 ADMINISTRATIVE AND POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

The ***Glarner Schabziger*** is referred to as a pure "cantonal product" by the interviewees. Its name refers directly to a specific place, Glarus, which is a town, a commune and a canton. This multiple reference reflects both the provenance of the product and its regional importance. The factory is located in the town of Glarus. Milk delivery is restricted to the canton. The definition of its localness is consequently strongly related to these political and administrative identities, even though one of the essential ingredients comes from outside the canton (the clover used for seasoning). Apparently, this fact does not disturb the (cantonal) pureness of the *Schabziger*. In addition, another administrative boundary intervenes in the construction of the local: the mountain zone. Milk delivery to *Glarner Milch AG* is restricted to

farmers producing in the area officially designated as mountainous according to the classification of the Federal Office for Agriculture. This excludes dairy farmers located in the lowlands of the canton.

Le Grand Pré is the name of the place where *Prolait* built the new cheese factory. It is located in Moudon, the small town where the cheese specialities were once created. The town serves as a clear geographical reference and as a centre of gravity for this network. The cheese is only made of milk produced within a radius of 30 km of the town. Furthermore, the cheese specialities are related to the cantonal authorities, which own the names and recipes, as the former owner of the cheese-making school. This cantonal identification was clearly stated in the debates surrounding the closure of the institution. The media and politicians referred to these cheeses as cantonal heritage. Moreover, these specialities are labelled with a cantonal appellation: *Produits du terroir Vaudois*.

In contrast, **MIBA** does not refer explicitly to the political borders in defining the localisation of its products. This probably relates to its 'trans-cantonal' nature.

As shown here, administrative and political boundaries play an important role in the definition of the localness of food, above all in delimitating the area where food comes from and is produced.

5.1.2 AREA OF ACTIVITY OF THE COOPERATIVE/FEDERATION

The boundaries of cooperatives and POs only partially reproduce political boundaries. In Glarus, the milk for the production of the **Glerner Schabziger** is delivered by the local PO and produced within the commune of Glarus. However, if needed, additional milk is bought from a neighbouring valley. **MIBA** regroups local cooperatives in multiple cantons in north-west Switzerland and competitors are active in the same area. Consequently, although the dairy products are made exclusively from milk produced by members of the MIBA federation, this gives only general information about the location of milk production. Similarly, **Prolait** straddles two cantons, but also includes several suppliers from other cantons located close to the political borders. As the cheese is made of milk from a limited area around Moudon, this has little impact on the milk provision to *Le Grand Pré SA*. However, all the members of the federation contributed to the initial investment and are therefore involved in the food network, expanding its geographical boundaries on the production side.

5.1.3 STRUCTURE OF RETAILER

At the market level, the *Glerner Schabziger* is essentially sold through big retailers in the east and central parts of Switzerland, where there is the highest demand for this very specialised product. However, the nationwide character of the main retailers facilitates its distribution across the whole country. This speciality is also exported to European countries and even to the USA. Some *Schabziger* by-products even specifically target foreign markets. From this

perspective, the food network dramatically flows over the boundaries set at the level of milk production and processing.

In the case of *Le Grand Pré SA*, an important part of the production is sold under a big retailer's regional label: *Migros de la region*. This label implies a precise definition of localness which follows the internal segmentation of the retailer into regional sections. In short, in order to be sold under this label in the regional section shops, the products have to come from the area of this same section. Sometimes, as in this case, the boundaries more or less match a canton's borders, sometimes they include several cantons. The retailer's structure consequently has an important influence on where these cheese specialities can be sold and consumed. However, *Prolait* is actively looking for new partnerships that could extend the geographical limits of their market. Again, this expansion strategy depends on the existing boundaries of the actors who would be integrated (enrolled) in the LFN.

MIBA markets most of its products through its wholesaling activities. This gives autonomy to the federation regarding retailers' labels. However, this autonomy is relative and might decrease as MIBA will probably need to join the big retailers in order to reach its growth objectives. As an example, the federation could not access a local branch of a supermarket chain because the factory where the milk was processed lies 2 km further than the limit tolerated by the supermarket's local label.

The examples of *Le Grand Pré SA* and MIBA illustrate uneven power relations in the negotiation of the definition of localness. As they control the access to crucial markets, big retailers are able to impose their criteria on small suppliers. For this kind of actor, regional labels on the one hand offer valuable opportunities for market positioning, but on the other hand might become obstacles to market access.

5.2 The moralities of 'the local'

When the actors in our three case studies call their products 'local', they make the claim that their products are different, specific. Thus, the explicit use of the local/regional label and terminology is of high importance as it makes it possible to build alternative narratives based on specific values. The values attributed to these products vary significantly, opening a second field of negotiation on what 'the local' is. As already mentioned, we have identified four core values which our interviewees associate with 'the local': provenance, origin, proximity-solidarity and ecology.

5.2.1 LOCAL AS PROVENANCE

MIBA products (milk, yogurt, 'industrial' cheese) are very similar to standardised products found in supermarkets. However, the PO claims that its products are of high quality and its marketing strategy is fully oriented towards freshness and the regional provenance of the milk: "made from 100 per cent regional milk" and "the freshness from here" are the slogans.

So provenance is the core argument in the definition of their localness: “*These are real regional products, 100 per cent, you know where the milk is from*” (MIBA management board member)⁴. The other two cases refer to provenance as well, but in connection with origin.

5.2.2 LOCAL AS ORIGIN

The cheese specialities of *Le Grand Pré SA* are generally described as a local tradition in relation to the historical dimension of the old cheese-making school founded in 1889. The small-scale production is another aspect of this traditional identity: the craftsmanship and knowledge of the cheese-maker remain essential. In fact, the cheeses themselves are more recent and were basically created for the teaching activities of the school, without having been previously made in the region. Moreover, the processing uses the most modern knowledge and equipment. Beyond the arguments about the legitimacy of the claim, the construction of the localness of these cheese specialities clearly draws on the traditional. The traditional dimension of the *Glarner Schabziger* is even clearer as its history goes back 550 years and it is celebrated as cultural goods.

In addition to tradition, the value of origin assumes that the specificity of the place is somehow reflected in the product and makes it unique. *Glarner Schabziger* nicely illustrates this connection. Its origin is clearly related to Glarus, as the adjective *Glarner* indicates. The Glarus region itself is commonly associated with the ‘special’ and the ‘original’ since the canton of Glarus and its people are presented as pioneers in matters of several developments during history (e.g. first constitution, industrialisation, factory law, social insurance, political reform). This identity has a significant impact on the marketing of the product. The keywords used by those responsible for the marketing of *Glarner Schabziger* to describe the product reflect this image: unique, original, natural, emotional, simple and ‘brave’.

5.2.3 LOCAL AS PROXIMITY AND SOLIDARITY

Although the products in our three case studies are not sold from the farm gate and do not particularly result in physical producer-consumer encounters, many interviewees refer to a closer link and solidarity between producers and consumers. As an example, this member of the *Le Grand Pré SA* management board relates this connection with the alternative nature of the network: “*Now I think the proximity, a more direct link with the producer, has a positive impact as well, with the consumer: there is not only one way*”⁵. Here, proximity is not absolute, but compared to conventional networks. Interestingly, a small number of female farmers have been contracted to promote the cheese specialities in supermarkets. They play an interesting role here: as farmers’ representatives, they create an interface between the consumers and the producers. By this direct and physical contact, they symbolise the proximity to the farmers, which should result in consumers’ sympathy and solidarity. According to a member of *Le Grand Pré SA* managing board, federations and cooperatives have a specific role in this creation of new relations with consumers, mainly because the big

processing companies have lost the connection with ‘the local’: *“I don’t think they will be able to reach these consumers, who are increasing in percentage, who seek more proximity. Neither Crema nor Emmi will be able to sell these products”*⁶.

The organisations in the three case studies aim to create alternative markets with fairer economic relations. From this perspective, the purchase of local products is firstly perceived as an expression of solidarity with the farmers. This understanding of localism implies “a category of ‘otherness’” that reduces solidarity to the limits of the ‘community’” (Allen 1999: 122). This idea is clearly expressed in the case of *Le Grand Pré SA*, whose products are positioned against foreign imports, with little competition from national markets. This defensive localism might overshadow other concerns of food system sustainability, namely in environmental matters (Hinrichs 2003, Winter 2003).

5.2.4 LOCAL AS ECOLOGICAL

Ecological sustainability is not central in our three case studies. More specifically, the development of the three local productions did not imply modifications of farm practices toward more ecological modes of production. Still, the ecological benefits are mentioned in the interviews, mostly in relation to the question of food miles: transportation (and its negative outcomes for environment) is minimised from farm to factory and from factory to shops and consumers. In the case of *Le Grand Pré SA*, the argument of food miles is stronger when looking at the competing products on the market, which are mainly imported French cheeses: *“There is this double aspect: it comes from here... No transportation or less transportation. There are the economic and ecological aspects. And saying we’re from here, I think we raise people’s awareness of a respectful local production”* (*Le Grand Pré SA* marketing manager)⁷.

As suggested here, we have found in our interviews a widespread idea that Swiss agriculture is generally more ecological and cleaner in international comparison. Consequently, buying Swiss products rather than imported ones can be seen as better for the environment *per se*. However this belief has not been empirically evidenced⁸ and illustrates the propensity to assume the benefits of local food in a ‘unreflexive’ way (DuPuis & Goodman 2005).

6. Doing the local, transforming the food network

As summarised in table 1, we have seen so far how the actors produce and reformulate the localness of their food production. We will describe now how ‘the local’ in turn transforms the food networks in which the actors are located, conferring new qualities on the food networks. In other words, by implementing localisation strategies, the actors in our three case studies introduce, willingly or not, alternative elements or ‘seeds of change’ contesting the logics of the conventional food system that previously characterised relations among actors in the networks.

[Table 1 here]

6.1 Glarus: fostering the local economy

The construction of the new curd processing unit in Glarus led to the reorganisation of relationships among actors in the local economy. The new focus on origin makes a case for the marketing of the product as a regional and mountain product. As noted by a farmer, it also gives more transparency for the consumers than before: *“Yes it is a product from Glarus. It is called Glarner Schabziger, then it should actually be so” (dairy farmer, Glarus)⁹.*

In turn, this newly negotiated limitation regarding the origin of the milk results in a new partnership between the milk producers and the local factory, with new relations of mutual dependency. Dairy farmers deliver all their production to one processor and the factory relies on only one curd provider. If one of the partners gets into trouble, the other will be deeply affected. At the beginning, the head of the family factory was sceptical of being dependent on only one curd supplier. However, as this dependency goes both ways, it has positive impacts too. On the one hand, as the majority shareholder of the new production company, the PO – and all participating farmers – has strengthened its position and gained some control. Now farmers have more influence on milk delivery conditions and even on broader decision-making and strategic planning. Only their milk is processed and it cannot be replaced by cheaper milk from outside the canton. As underlined by a member of the management board of the family factory: *“(…) it gives them also a certain security that they are not simply a cue ball (…) but they can really participate” (employee, Geska AG)¹⁰.* On the other hand, the factory gains more control of the curd provision and its quality. As a result of this new partnership and interdependency, both have to be less self-oriented and more focused on consensual solutions. In the end, the new partnership is a result of the localising strategy which fosters solidarity and appreciation between milk producers and the *Schabziger* factory. Moreover, the project is seen by participants as a sign for the whole canton: a sign of confidence in the region, to invest in the canton and its workplaces.

6.2 Le Grand Pré SA and Prolait: solidarity and collective autonomy

The involvement of *Prolait* in the processing and marketing of dairy products represents a major change in its activities and identity. Milk handling remains its primary activity, but the PO now has to act at different stages of the food network. This implies new direct connections between the PO and several actors (such as the big retailers), which significantly modifies the general position of *Prolait*, for instance in negotiations with partners such as big dairy companies. With this redefinition of its role and positioning, the federation had to develop and gain new types of skills and knowledge not only in milk processing and cheese making, but also in negotiations with retailers and in all the marketing activities. By drawing on origin and tradition, *Le Grand Pré SA* strengthens its products on the market against competitors and *Prolait's* position against more powerful partners.

So far, *Prolait's* position in the dairy sector has been characterised by its ties with one dairy company, *Crema*, which purchases 80% of its milk production. Other POs in the same

situation have chosen the way of further integration by accepting exclusive relations with the company. The launching of the *Le Grand Pré* brand and localised products by *Prolait* is clearly related to an oppositional strategy. Here, local food becomes a way to collectively gain autonomy from the industry. The amount of milk processed at the cheese factory might seem derisory (a few per cent of all the milk traded by *Prolait*), but this initiative has a symbolic dimension that surpasses the economic impact. It emphasises solidarity among the federation members as well as the objective of fairer economic relations in interaction with the moral dimension of proximity and solidarity. The farmers have invested collectively. If everything goes well, all of them should benefit at the end, as the profit will be redistributed through the milk price. Consequently, *Prolait* refuses to communicate which farms deliver the milk that is processed in its factory. Defining the local at the level of the federation should enable all its members to feel part of the project and identify with the products and not only a few lucky farmers in the area of Moudon. Solidarity is opposed to the individualistic behaviour that undermines the position of dairy farmers at the national scale. In a context of growing competition, the cheese specialities symbolise and revitalise the narrative of unification of the producers against the big processing companies. Solidarity is then related to a collective quest for autonomy, as one way to resist economic pressures ensuing from the deregulation of the dairy sector.

6.3 MIBA: building identity in a context of competition

With the revival of its old brand, MIBA wants to gain some added value by ascribing a clear provenance and proximity to its products. In doing this, they draw on the value of solidarity between consumers and farmers. Another explicit objective is to foster identification of the members of the PO in a newly deregulated sector. Milk trading organisations, such as MIBA, are now competing against each other to attract 'good' dairy farmers (i.e. with high production and proximity to the main roads). In this competition, federative structures are at a disadvantage as they will accept any farmers from its area, even those located in remote places. This implies higher costs for milk collection and pressure on the milk price, which might decrease the attractiveness of the federation. Consequently, the MIBA managing board feels the need to enhance its members' loyalty. Defining the local products as MIBA products supports this strategy. As one of its staff says: "*Something has to be done concerning identification. And it is clear: you can't create identification without a product*"¹¹. For the same reason, MIBA felt it was its duty to invest in the regional factory and be part of the salvaging of the last processing facility in their area. The federation even managed to restrict the factory to processing only milk from the MIBA region, against the initial plan of *Emmi*, the majority shareholder and the biggest dairy group in Switzerland.

As for *Prolait* and *Le Grand Pré SA*, the federation chooses to extend the identification with the products to all its members rather than to the farmers actually delivering the milk used for their processing. This explains – along with more practical factors such as flexibility in the milk

trade – the reference to the relatively large ‘MIBA region’ as provenance. On the one hand, it enables the products to be sold in the whole area as being ‘from here’ and capitalising on the century-long history of the federation. On the other hand, it avoids feelings of favouritism resulting in dissension among its members. From this perspective, the development of local products is a way to secure MIBA’s future by strengthening the adhesion of its members and with it, the future of dairy production in the region, especially in its remote parts.

7. Conclusion

Our three case studies yield multiple, diverse and always re-negotiated forms of localness. What is ‘local’ evolves together with the food networks and the relative power of the actors involved. Important variations appear as well when the focus moves from one place in the network to another, namely from production and processing to marketing or to consumption. While defining how and why their products were ‘local’, the actors are constructing their identity. Implicitly, they are pointing out their differences from ‘industrial’, ‘global’ and ‘anonymous’ food. These categories are then constructed in parallel, within a moral framework that generally emphasises the benefit of ‘the local’. Where anonymous ‘industrial’ food comes out of a black box, ‘local’ is clearly related to a place and to people. Where liberal and globalised markets promote individualistic behaviours motivated by self-interest, LFNs put forward solidarity and a collective struggle for autonomy.

Yet there is no strong evidence of these food networks being radically better or more sustainable than others. Economically, these initiatives are still in their infancy and are thus fragile, even if a long-term objective is to gain security at the level of market access. Socially, elements indicating some improvements in the producers’ positioning within the broader food system are found in all three case studies. However, these are not major changes: the milk price paid to the farmers is barely affected and it is hard to discern whether and how power relations are affected within the global system. As for the environment, the development of the local products did not involve modifications of farm practices toward more ecological modes of production and environmental benefits are only arguably related to transportation.

Following our analysis, it appears that the three projects enact ‘the local’ in ways that do not radically transform the food network. Nevertheless, small changes and openings for developments are identified, indicating progressive evolution toward more sustainable food systems. Our case studies confirm Hinrichs’ (2003: 43) statement that ‘localised’ food networks produce “modest socio-economic, cultural and environmental shifts in encouraging directions”. These shifts are not all explicit and, at first glance, might appear marginal in the actors’ strategies. In most of the interviews, market and profit-based strategies are dominant. Issues such as price, costs and market shares are central. Yet, as we have seen, they mix with other objectives, referring to other kinds of values and concerns: regional economy, solidarity and identity. The fact that our three case studies are related to the activity of cooperative structures echoes conclusions of several scholars highlighting the role of

cooperatives in the resistance to neoliberal pressures (e.g. Gray & Stevenson 2008, Mooney 2004, van der Ploeg 2008). Stock *et al.* (2014) relate cooperation to strategies of “actual autonomy”, where autonomy involves collective freedom for farmers as a social class connecting individual freedoms to the on-going reproduction of the farming sector. Even if involuntarily and imperfectly, the three farmers’ cooperatives involved in our case studies are developing similar strategies by negotiating definitions of ‘the local’ that should help them to strengthen their positioning within the industry, and thus secure continuity for their members.

By exploring how ‘the local’ is constructed, we have shed some light on the diversity of moralities inspiring these initiatives. This unsettled nature of ‘the local’ might seem confusing and an unfortunate conclusion would be to understand that actors make use of ‘the local’ in a very general and undefined way in order to develop other – more or less hidden – agendas. ‘The local’ would be just a pretext. Yet, we argue there is more to this construction of ‘the local’. The convergence of a set of alternative values has a transformative power. Localness as a marketing strategy has opened the way for these values in a context deeply marked by market-based thinking. At the same time, the definition (as a process) of ‘the local’ influences the network. By enrolling localisation strategies in their networks, the actors work for change: new actors are involved to fulfil new needs; new meanings are attributed to former elements. So, localisation prepares the ground for change in the food system and introduces seeds that might germinate, one day, and develop into deeper changes.

Acknowledging the diversity of the moralities activated by the actors in the development of these food networks follows the seminal call by Gibson-Graham (2003, 2008) urging social scientists to look for the diverse economies that exist beyond the hegemony of global capitalism. Paralleling other work, such as that of Rosin and Campbell (2009) or Lerner and Le Heron (Lerner & Le Heron 2002), which contests monolithic understandings of the politics of agri-food systems, our work indicates that we must indeed pay closer attention to the diversity of economic logics within emerging food networks in order to better understand what animates them and what their potential is for participating in a broader transformation of wider food systems.

8. Notes

1. The terms 'food systems' and 'food networks' have been used with different meanings in the literature. For our purposes, we have chosen to use 'food system' to refer to the dominant modes of organisation of food production, processing, trade and consumption, applied at a broad scale. In contrast, we use 'food network' to refer to specific networks constituted around one specific product (or group of products). Consequently, in this paper we discuss specific networks that are part of a wider food system (described as conventional).
2. Due to our focus on the development of the networks and because of issues of methods, we do not integrate the consumers directly in our research. One of the main methodological limitations was that this category of actors is very undefined and elusive when looking at food networks involving big retailers and supermarkets. Consequently, to cover consumers' representations of 'the local' in a satisfying way would require different methods, such as quantitative surveys or a specific large-scale interview campaign. Unfortunately, this was not possible within this research project. However, consumers are very present, indirectly, in the discourses of the other categories of actors we interviewed.
3. Since 2007, development projects at the regional scale, where agriculture is a predominant part, have been eligible for specific federal subsidies.
4. Original in French: *"C'est quand même un produit régional, 100 pourcents, on sait d'où le lait vient"*.
5. Original in French: *"Maintenant, je pense que la proximité, le lien plus direct avec le producteur a aussi un impact bénéfique, chez le consommateur. Il n'y a pas qu'une voie"*.
6. Original in French: *"Je ne pense pas qu'ils arriveront à toucher ces consommateurs qui sont progressant en pourcentage, qui recherchent plus de proximité. C'est ni Cremo, ni Emmi qui pourront vendre ces produits"*.
7. Original in French: *"Il y a ce double aspect: ça vient de chez nous: pas de transports, ou moins de transports. Il y a le côté économique et écologique aussi et le fait de dire que nous sommes d'ici, je pense qu'on sensibilise le consommateur sur une production respectueuse locale"*.
8. Even if scientifically contested (Baur & Nitsch 2013, Chevillat *et al.* 2012), this strong belief seems to be widely shared in the Swiss farming context, in relation to strict regulations and the strong environmental focus of the national agricultural policy (Chappuis *et al.* 2008, Mann 2003).
9. Original in German: *"Ja das ist ein Glarner Produkt. Eben es heisst ja Glarner Schabziger und dann sollte es ja eigentlich so sein"*.

10. Original in German: *“(...) es gibt ihnen auch eine gewisse Sicherheit, dass sie also nicht einfach der Spielball sind (...) sondern sie können wirklich mitgestalten”*.
11. Original in French: *“Il y a quelque chose à faire sur plan de l'identification: Et c'est clair tu ne fais pas d'identification si tu ne passes pas par un produit”*.

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